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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

14 January 1955

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 101-54 (Revised) 1/

SUBJECT: The Beria Case Revisited: A Christmas Present to the Soviet Intelligentsia

I. The Abakumov Case Interpreted as a Power Struggle

1. Moscow's recent announcement of the trial and execution of the long deposed chief of the old MGB and Beria associate, V.S. Abakumov, and several of his subordinates has resurrected the ghost of Beria and has opened a new round of speculation about the stability of the Soviet leadership. The announcement has been widely interpreted as a sign of "severe strain in the principle of collegial leadership" 25X1 [redacted] an indication of the "never-ending struggle for power in the 25X1 Kremlin" [redacted] a sign of the "enhancement of the Soviet Army's standing" presumably at the expense of civilian authority [redacted] 25X1 25X1 25X1 [redacted] "the approach of a major crisis" in the Kremlin [redacted] 25X1 25X1 and evidence of a "new intensification" of Khrushchev's rivalry with Malenkov [redacted]

2. The view that the Abakumov case reflects an intensification of strains within the Soviet leadership rests primarily on the interpretation of a number of alleged breaks in the monolithic uniformity of the Soviet press. It is asserted that there has been better coverage of Khrushchev's activities by Pravda than by Izvestiya and that differences have appeared between these papers in their treatment of Lenin, Stalin, and problems of current policy (e.g., heavy industry vs. welfare). 2/ These are taken to be possible indications of factional conflict within the ruling group over power and policy.

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It is further argued that the "Leningrad case" mentioned in the Moscow communique on the Abakumov group is related to a factional conflict and represents a warning from one faction to the other. The "Leningrad case" is assumed to refer to events that took place in Leningrad during Abakumov's tenure as chief of state security, particularly to the purge of Leningrad Party functionaries following the death of Zhdanov in 1948. Since Malenkov and his cohorts were the chief beneficiaries of the Leningrad Party purge, some analysts argue either that Malenkov's political opponents are employing the Abakumov case to attack his present power position or that Malenkov is attempting to absolve himself of any responsibility for the Leningrad purge.

3. The far-reaching conclusions in the above interpretations rest on extremely fragile evidence and have other important defects as well. First, these arguments fail to explain the unusual reference to the Soviet intelligentsia in the Abakumov announcement, and they do not relate the announcement to any clearly identifiable development in contemporary Soviet politics. Second, these interpretations overlook the possibility that the reference to the "Leningrad case" may apply to the many lesser persons who were affected by the widespread political shake-up in Leningrad between 1948-50 rather than to the high politicos who were almost certainly eliminated in the power struggle. It is possible that many of these lesser persons had already been released in the general amnesty in 1953 and that Malenkov is now taking credit for this action. Third, the argument that a factional struggle is now underway in the USSR appears largely based on the premise that the Soviet press has been transformed into a forum for high-level political controversy and that the protagonists are appealling for support to the masses or at least to the broad Party ranks. Fourth, the interpretation of the Abakumov case as a warning to Malenkov ignores the fact that in a political system where power is ruthlessly exercised political adversaries can hardly afford to telegraph their punches. In the USSR public announcements are likely to follow shifts in power rather than precede them. Khrushchev's public support of Malenkov's position on agriculture in the Bernal interview and Malenkov's repetition of Stalin's year-end practice of making ex cathedra pronouncements on world affairs do not suggest that Malenkov's position has been affected. Lastly, the thesis of conflict relies too heavily on the traditional, stereotyped canons of Soviet public behavior that were valid under Stalin in order to explain present Soviet behavior. Under the present system of "collective leadership", the regime apparently tolerates a considerable amount of differences in public behavior and these should not be interpreted as reflecting "strains within the leadership".

II. An Alternative Interpretation of the Abakumov Case

4. A plausible explanation of the Abakumov case can be found in certain clearly identifiable contemporary events in the USSR. The announcement of the case can be related to the general trend evidenced in the Soviet state since Stalin's death toward emphasizing the legal rights of ordinary Soviet citizens. In particular, the timing of the Abakumov announcement in connection with the Soviet Writers' Congress, the reference to the crimes against the Soviet intelligentsia, the events associated with postwar Soviet cultural policy, and the récent chages in the regime's treatment of literary figures strongly suggest that the announcement of the Abakumov case may be a symbolic repudiation of arbitrary state policy and police action against the intelligentsia in the postwar period, and may have no relationship to high-level conflicts over power and policy.

5. The significance of the Abakumov indictment becomes clear if it is viewed against the background of the trends which were initiated in postwar Soviet cultural development by the Party Central Committee decree of August 1946. This decree, and its exegesis by Politburo Member Zhdanov, specifically attacked the Leningrad literary community and touched off the vigorous and widespread postwar campaign to impose an ideological straight-jacket on literature, drama, music, biology, and linguistics. The attack against the Leningrad journals Zvezda and Leningrad and the popular authors Zoshchenko and Akhmatova characterized the whole postwar Soviet intellectual atmosphere: recurrent purges of intellectuals for "cosmopolitanism", "deviationism", "Westernism"; promulgations and reversals of new Party lines; violent denunciations of Soviet intellectuals; and abject recantations by individuals charged with official "sins". Almost every important intellectual came under heavy criticism, and many others of lesser rank lost their positions and even their liberty as the result of their errors. The results of this purge were twofold: many of the condemned "cosmopolitans", particularly Jewish writers, disappeared from the cultural scene;* and a process of stagnation began in the Soviet arts, with the most able persons busying themselves in administrative duties or translating chores.

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* The Jewish Labor Committee estimates that 200 Jewish writers have disappeared since the end of World War II. (NYT, 17 December 1954).

6. The period from the death of Stalin to the convocation of the twice-postponed Writers' Congress in December 1954 witnessed an active struggle between the "liberal" and "official" elements in Soviet culture over the interpretation of the Zhdanov decree. Between April and December 1953, a whole chorus of protest [1] (e.g., Ovechkin, Zorin, Ehrenburg, Khachaturian, Pomerantsev, etc.) was raised in the Soviet cultural world against the tenets of orthodoxy and bureacratic interference in the arts. The very fact that this protest actually occurred points to the strength of the opposition and the bitterness of the issues. However, beginning early in 1954 the literary hatchet-men for the regime [2] (e.g., Surkov, Yermilov, Simonov, etc.) reacted violently against the "liberal" stirrings by employing both verbal bombast and administrative measures identical to the early stages of the Zhdanov cultural purge. Writers were denounced publicly, the editors of two leading journals, October and New World, were removed under heavy criticism, and several noted authors were expelled from the Writers' Union. In all the major attacks against the "liberals", the Surkov group specifically flaunted the Zhdanov decree as authorization. On the eve of the Writers' Congress the stage appeared to be set for a stricter form of repression of the "liberal" protagonists.

7. However, despite the vehemence of the attacks on the "liberals", there were signs late in 1954 that the regime did not wish to repeat some of the more violent excesses that had occurred during the later stages of the cultural purge in 1949-50. In August, Ehrenburg, usually a bellwether of Soviet policy in the arts, refused to recant before his critics. More significant, Marguerita Aligher, the young Jewish poetess who had been severely criticized as a "cosmopolitan" in 1949 and who had not been heard of since, attacked her critics in Literary Gazette.[3] This was the strongest indication that the harsh policy toward the intellectuals had been called off by higher authority and that the Party's policy toward the intellectuals was undergoing re-examination. Evidently, the regime did not wish to fabricate any new "conspiracy" against Soviet cultural policy similar to the "conspiracy"

1/ See New World, July, October, and December 1953 and Soviet Music, November 1953.

2/ See Pravda, 25 May and 3 June 1954 and Literary Gazette, 17, 20, July and 17 August 1954.

3/ See New York Times, 12 December 1954 and The Socialist Courier, December 1954.

uncovered by Pravda (28 January 1949) during the heat of the campaign against the "cosmopolitans". It appears that the regime considered that the harsh measures had gone too far and were defeating their purpose by demoralizing large numbers of the Soviet intelligentsia.

8. Viewed in this context, the Abakumov announcement may have been intended as an official repudiation of the harsh police methods that had traditionally been employed to implement Soviet policies and as a promise to Soviet intellectuals that there would be a more charitable attitude toward deviations. This theme of moderation was echoed at the recent Writers' Congress when V. Panova and V. Grossman, who had been under severe criticism, were elected to the new board of directors of the Writers' Union, along with A. Tvardovsky, who as recently as August had been removed from the editorship of the heavily attacked journal New World. Thus, within the space of a few months the Party had reversed itself regarding the treatment of the intelligentsia. Moreover, in all the discussions at the Writers' Congress the speakers scrupulously avoided mention by name of the controversial Zhdanov decree, even though this decree had been specifically referred to during the period before the Congress. Although the basic Soviet concept of the propagandistic function of literature was reaffirmed, the Party Central Committee failed to lay down a precise directive as to how Soviet writers should ply their craft. Lastly, as a measure of poetic justice, the Leningrad intellectuals were promised a new periodical to replace the one which had been abolished as the result of the Zhdanov edict of 1946.

III. Some Possible Political Implications of the Abakumov Case

9. The treatment of the Abakumov case appears to have been designed primarily for a highly receptive public audience rather than to instill terror in the security forces. Only a few days before the Moscow announcement, the regime took measures to offset any adverse reaction in the security forces by granting awards and medals to several hundred MVD and KGB troops for "long and irreproachable service". The present head of the KGB, I.A. Serov, also received an award on the day following the Abakumov announcement. Moreover, there are no indications that the top Soviet leadership has altered, or plans to alter, the basic security mission of the police forces.

10. It is also unlikely that the trial of the Abakumov group before a military tribunal, as in the Beria case, has any bearing on the relations between the military and security forces or between

the Party and the military. All three of the much-heralded Moscow trials of the thirties, as well as the trial in camera of Marshal Tukhachevsky, were conducted by Military Collegia of the Soviet Supreme Court. These prewar precedents were established when the prestige of the Red Army was at its nadir, and they suggest that military tribunals have broad jurisdiction over cases involving serious state crimes or defendants of high military rank.

11. From an intelligence standpoint, the removal of Abakumov lends support to the thesis that Party elements, with Stalin's blessing and probably under Malenkov's leadership, had gone a long way toward undermining Beria's control over the security forces well before the old dictator's death. Although Stalin's death probably slowed down the process of whittling down Beria's power, it does not appear, in retrospect, that this process was significantly checked, since the Party agent over the police, S.D. Ignatiev, was able to survive the reversal of the "doctors' plot" and has since prospered fairly well. The very survival of Ignatiev throws considerable doubt on the widely-held view that Beria was primarily responsible for the reversal of the "doctors' plot" and that this action was an aspect of the power struggle. It appears more likely that this decision was reached by the entire Party Presidium in line with the general policy of reducing tensions within Soviet society, even though the ultimate target of the original plot, i.e., Beria, remained unchanged.

12. If the above interpretation is correct, then the Abakumov case seems of political importance not as a sign of strains within the Soviet leadership but rather as a reflection of the gradual accomodation since Stalin's death in the relationship between state and society in the USSR. The present Soviet leadership appears to be learning the lesson taught by the eminent historian Klyuchevsky, that the state cannot continue to grow in strength while the people wither spiritually and materially. True, the essentials of totalitarian dictatorship remain basically intact, and the promises of greater personal and material security are relatively inexpensive to the state. But they contribute to the accumulation of vital precedents which have already been established in the body politic, the totality of which will be difficult to reverse without impairment of public morale and which could over the course of many years modify the traditional patterns of Soviet behavior.

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